

# The impact of political knowledge and democratic competencies on desirable aims of civic education

## Results from the German contribution to the IEA Civic Education Project

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Civic education can be understood in various ways. In a more narrow sense civic education aims at the acquisition of knowledge of the constitution and the basic democratic institutions and regulations. In a broader understanding the focus is more on the acquisition of competences that enables participation and democratic action. In this broader sense, civic education includes social learning and political socialization.

In Germany, although there is an ongoing discussion on this question, the understanding of civic education normally refers to a broader understanding. This is the result from an historical review of civic education in Germany (Händle 1999), an analysis of the framework in all 16 federal states (Trommer 1999) and a survey of nearly 100 experts of civic education which we have made in 1996 (Oesterreich et al. 1999). Civic education aims at creating the "autonomous citizen" which is understood to be an individual who is politically well informed, who understands and accepts the values and legal norms within the constitution, who respects human dignity, who is actively tolerant, and who has developed the ability and readiness to participate in political and civic affairs and (Trommer 1999).

The differences in civic education make an international comparison difficult. Studies on civic education clearly differ from studies dealing with mathematics and natural sciences. Knowledge and competence in mathematics and natural science are defined by an international consent on the content of curricula. In civic education, such a common consent does not exist. Furthermore - as already stated - knowledge and competencies in civic education are only one important issue among others.

With the broad understanding of civic education in Germany corresponds the fact that within the 16 federal states civic education is taught under different names and in different subject areas. Civic education is not confined to instruction about government and politics, but finds expression in the political dimensions of a range of subjects taught in school. Civic education is also a central objective in interdisciplinary and practice-orientated projects in school. Finally, it is expected that civic education will also take place within school life; in students' interaction with their peers, teachers, students councils and school administrators.

### Democratic competencies

Civic education has a cognitive dimension, which means an adequate understanding of political processes going on in society, and a social dimension, which means being a good democrat. It is obvious, that the one cannot be substituted by the other. Somebody who has a democratic orientation will not have much influence in society if he/she has no adequate idea of society and its basic institutions and regulations. On the other hand,

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somebody who understands what is going on in society will not necessarily be a good democrat.

But what are democratic competencies? When we exclude the cognitive dimension of an adequate understanding of processes going on in society and concentrate on the dimension of personality factors, democratic competences could be seen as the ability to participate, cooperate, to compromise and to be tolerant. The interests of others have to be respected to be legitimate in principle, even though one wants to accomplish one's own aims and interests. Therefore, democratic action means communicating with others in order to find mutual solutions.

Our survey of experts on civic education has shown that 99 percent of the experts believe that "tolerance and respect for other human beings" is an important or one of the most important learning goals of civic education, 98 percent believe in the importance of social responsibility and 92 percent in the importance of solidarity (*Oesterreich et al. 1999*). On the other hand the experts put less weight on the importance of learning goals, such as "learning discipline and sticking to rules" (only 46 percent agreement), and are clearly denying the importance of a "readiness to submit and to conform" (only 12 percent agreement), both learning goals which some decades ago were considered to be highly important.

These are empirical results which obviously do not leave much space for a discussion of other desirable personality characteristics in civic education. But it is much more complicated to define democratic competencies theoretically. Democratic competencies cannot be defined merely theoretically because their definition depends also on a definition of society and the interests associated with such a definition. Democratic competencies have to be defined both by an understanding of democracy, and by social psychological theories which explain how these required competencies develop. Democratic competencies have to reflect the ideal type of democracy. Individuals have to develop a basic orientation that concentrates on the ideal of a communication based on consent and free of illegitimate rule (*Habermas 1981*). Unfortunately there is no empirical scientific tradition on these topics (*Reinders 2001*).

For decades the research on democracy on the personality level helped itself with a negative definition of a democratic personality. This is the concept of the authoritarian personality, a personality type which is basically undemocratic by relying to authority, being submissive, conforming, uncritical, dogmatic, and aggressive. Although the concept was designed for a more limited scope as to explain the success of fascism it soon became the major concept in studying personality factors in democracy. This holds true for the first major publication on authoritarianism (*Adorno u.a. 1950*) and later publications which focus primarily on democratic competencies (*Harbordt und Grieger 1995, Altemeyer 1996, Schöbel 1997*).

Because of many especially methodological problems in measuring authoritarianism (*Altemeyer 1981; Oesterreich 1996*) this approach was not really successful. In addition the theoretical approach which is rooted in psychoanalytic theory has to be questioned seriously after more than five decades of empirical research (*Kirscht und Dillehay 1967; Altemeyer 1981; Oesterreich 1996*). On the other hand there can be no doubt that individuals differ in having a readiness to act in a democratic way or not regardless of how good they are informed politically and how good they understand democratic principles.

Democratic competencies can be referred to as a basic personality characteristic closely associated with individual autonomy. In this respect the idea of substituting the concept of democratic competencies negatively by the concept of authoritarianism never was wrong, although the realisation of this approach is burdened with empirical failure.

In the context of my studies on authoritarianism which aim at a new theoretical understanding of the phenomena associated with authoritarianism, I conceive the authoritarian personality as an individual who has not achieved during his/her lifecourse to give up to rely on authority. It is the unautonomous individual which, as Kant has formulated this in "What is enlightenment?", has learned to love the ties and bondages which

make him/her submit to the illegitimate rule of the nobility and the churches (*Kant 1977*). Authoritarian personalities can't cope with taxing situations and rely on authority figures who promise them shelter and support.

The idea of this approach is that security is a basic human need. It is a basic pattern of human response to stressful and uncertain situations which provoke anxiety and insecurity to seek security and shelter. Those who provide support, become by a process of psychological attribution, authorities. Therefore the mechanism of seeking support and shelter under strained conditions might be called an "authoritarian reaction". Socialization involves a negotiation with this basic reaction of flight in situations of uncertainty. As individuals develop, they learn to overcome the authoritarian reaction by formulating their own strategies to cope with reality. The authoritarian personality emerges out of an inability to generate such individual coping strategies. Authoritarian personalities defer to the dictates and control of others who offer them the certainty and comfort they cannot provide for themselves. Extensions of this basic authoritarian response are the rejection of the new and the unfamiliar, rigid adherence to norms and value systems, an anxious and inflexible response to new situations, suppressed hostility, and passive aggression.

Democratic societies require much flexibility in dealing with other people. Social relations are not regulated but have to be negotiated with other individuals in a cooperative way. In democratic societies order has to be established by an open minded discourse and communicative processes based on the principle of giving and taking. Authoritarian personalities have difficulties to compromise. As unautonomous individuals they lack self esteem and cannot regard others as having equal rights. They think in a hierarchical way, as these hierarchies provide them with security because they determine what is expected of them.

## The IEA Civic Education Study

Since the beginning of the 1970th there had been no large scale international comparison on civic education of young people (*Torney, Oppenheim, Farnen 1975*). Both the present study and the study from 1975 were organized by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (*IEA*). The IEA is an international organization which conducts representative investigations on school achievement. *Judith Torney-Purta* who already contributed to the first IEA study on civic education initiated and organized this second international study. The study started in 1994, the German project group at the *Berlin Max Planck Institute of Human Development* took part in this study since 1996.

The study has a twophased design. In phase I the situation of civic education in all the participating countries was studied. In Germany we focused on an analysis of the explicit goals of civic education and the normative expectations placed in them following German unification. The results of phase I are published as national case studies in an international volume (*Torney-Purta u.a. 1999*). In Germany we made a review of the historical development of civic education, an analysis of the guidelines and regulations concerning civic education in the federal states of Germany, explorations of school projects within the field of civic education, and a survey on the goals of civic education with approximately 100 experts in the field (*Händle, Oesterreich und Trommer 1999*).

Besides giving an overview on civic education in all participating countries, the findings of phase I were used to construct the items of the students questionnaire in phase II.

While the focus of phase I was on the goals and context of civic education the focus of phase II was on achievement and political socialization processes in adolescence in general.

We wanted to find out what young people know about democracy, their rights and duties as citizens, national and international politics, economic and ecological problems, how they understand democracy and their role as citizens, which concepts of society and which world views they develop, and how they are prepared to act politically.

28 countries participated in the study. We investigated representative samples of students from the 8th grade (in some countries 9th grade). The population included worldwide about 94000 students (in Germany 3700). In addition to these representative studies of students, a teacher survey was carried out including all teachers in the target population who transmit civic education (civics, history, geography, ethics, religion) and a school survey. Results of the international study were published in 2001 (*Torney-Purta u.a. 2001*). Results of the students questionnaire from the German national study were published in 2002 (*Oesterreich 2002*).

We have already discussed the problems of a common understanding of the goals of civic education. This understanding depends highly on national cultural traditions, national history and the organization of the schoolsystem. This specific situation requires a discursive and collaborative approach in defining the items for the international questionnaire. Based on the analyses of phase I we decided to ask questions on three major domains:

- Democracy and citizenship
- National identity and international relations and
- Social cohesion and diversity.

These domains were to be investigated in five types of items, including assessment of political knowledge and of interpretative skills, concepts of democracy and citizenship, political attitudes and expected participatory actions relating to politics.

The international questionnaire was designed for two lessons. In Germany we added a third lesson which gave us the opportunity to investigate some more important issues, as political apathy or right wing extremisms and first of all democratic competencies.

The investigation took place in 1999. In Germany three of the 16 federal states (Bremen, Niedersachsen and Hessen) refused to participate in the study and one federal state (Baden-Württemberg) did not permit testing in the Gymnasium. The reasons were problems of data protection and a critique of the international knowledge test which was not regarded as being adequate for the curricula and frameworks of the denying states. Therefore the German population is representative only for the participating federal states.

In the context of this article we cannot present and discuss the scales and items of the investigation (see *Oesterreich 2002*), but we will present the measure of democratic competencies, because it is central to our analyses and give a short description of the international knowledge test.

The measure of democratic competencies is based on 11 items, 5 of which were newly conceived, the other 6 were taken from a questionnaire I developed on authoritarian personality characteristics some years ago (*Oesterreich 1998*). The latter questionnaire has been tested in many investigations nationally as well as internationally. All items are bipolar in the form of Osgood-scales, the answers are reaching from "strongly admit" over "admit", "don't know" to again "admit" and "strongly admit" (*Oesterreich 2002*).

5 point scale  
in between

I'm not interested in why other people want something

**I can accept that other people have different views from mine**

*I try to make compromises*

**I try to understand why other people want something**

It's hard for me to accept that other people have other views

I am seldom willing to make compromises

**I can easily know what other people are feeling and understand what they do**

I can't easily understand what other people are feeling

**I can accept it if somebody sometimes makes a mistake**

I am not prepared to accept mistakes

If something happens to somebody I tend to think: "He/She deserved it!"

**I sympathize with people to whom something happens**

*I like to meet new people*

I don't like to meet new people

People who are not on my side are against me

**I can accept people who are not on my side**

I try to avoid contact with people who are different

**I like to have contact with people, even those who are different**

When people depend on me, I like to make them feel it

**When people depend on me. I don't make them feel it**

**I feel sorry for people in severe trouble**

I don't feel sorry for people in severe trouble

The scale is an attempt to measure individual qualifications and requirements of democratic behavior. The topics of the first 5 items are tolerance, willingness to understand other people and to compromise and cooperate. The other 6 items which are taken from my scale on authoritarianism (the answers indicating the opposite of authoritarianism) emphasize interest in and engagement for other people. The scale shows a middle inter-item correlation of  $r=0.18$  and an alpha-reliability of  $r=0.73$ , which are satisfactory measures.

Democratic competencies for sure include some more elements such as the willingness to stand for one's own point of view. Unfortunately there are severe methodological problems to make items on self assertion work in a context of items which primarily focus on social engagement. These problems cannot be discussed in this article. From our point of view the measure of democratic competencies in the form of the 11 items presented can be seen as a first attempt to positively measure democratic competencies on the individual level. It has to be elaborated in further research.

The test for political knowledge is based on 38 items, including items on basic characteristics of democratic societies, as freedom, rights and duties of citizens, furthermore items on an understanding of the parliamentary system and the market economy, the importance of having a free press, the role of interest groups, corruption and international organizations as the UNO. The test is designed in a multiple choice form offering 3 wrong and one correct answer on each item. The middle inter-item correlation of  $r=.18$  and an alpha reliability of  $r=.89$ . These are good measures.

According to IEA policy the test could not be published completely. Only 8 items were released for publication. The test is discussed thoroughly in the international volume as well as in the national volume (*Torney-Purta 2001; Oesterreich 2002*).

## Results on the impact of political knowledge and democratic competencies

We are going now to investigate to what extent central topics of civic education are more determined by cognitive factors (political knowledge) or personality factors (democratic competencies). This is not only an academic question but also a political one. The question refers directly to the old discussion to what extent schools should transfer knowledge or educate young people. While it is obvious that both a transfer of knowledge and an education of young people are required, the importance of these factors might differ highly for different issues of political education.

There is no doubt that political knowledge, in the sense of an adequate understanding of democracy and society on one hand and democratic competencies on the other, themselves are central goals of civic education. But both have furthermore the aim of generating desirable political convictions and a readiness to participate and act politically in a desirable way. The socialization of democratic competencies aims directly at political participation and political attitudes. Political knowledge has to be seen as a means to prepare young people to participate politically in an adequate way.

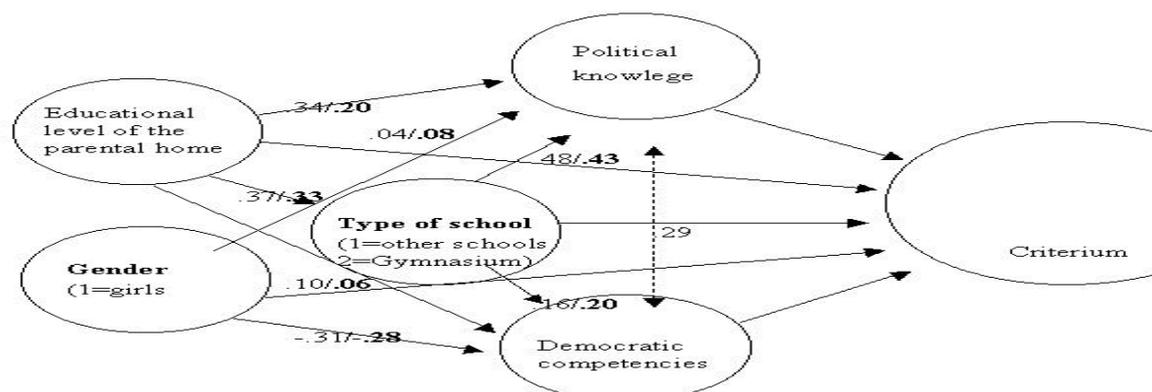
By using path-analyses (structural equation models) we aim to make clear that both the registration of political knowledge as well as of individual psychological requirements for democratic behavior are necessary for understanding civic education and political action. The following five predictors were included in the path analyses:

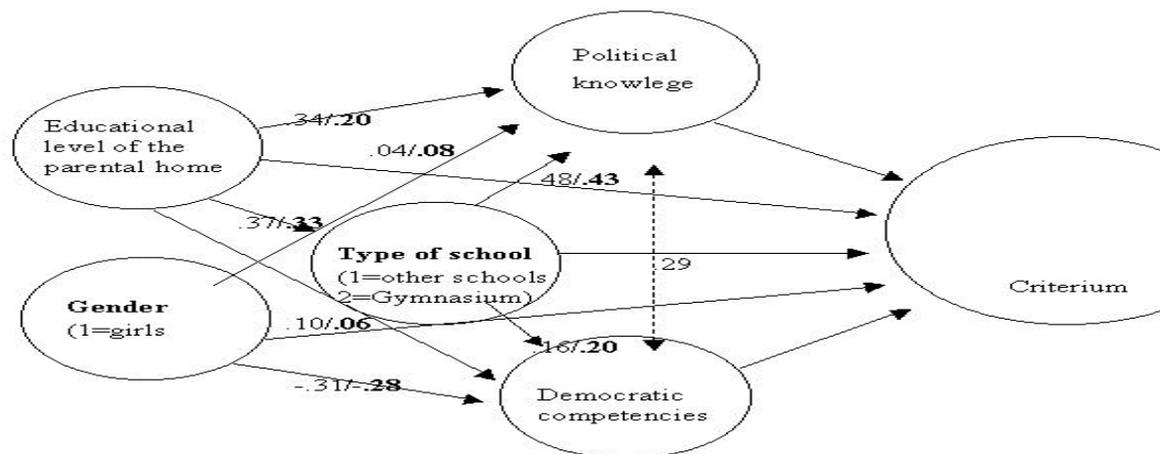
- parental level of education
- school type (Gymnasium versus other types of schools)
- gender
- political knowledge
- democratic competence

The predictors are interrelated as shown in graph 1.

The diagram shows the assumed connections which were to be tested within the model. The model shows - in the form of arrows - the so-called beta-paths. These betas mark connections comparable with betas in regression analyses. Readers familiar with path analyses might miss factor loadings. I decided to base the analyses on variables not factors as is common in using structural equation models. The problem with using factors is that the definition of parcels which are the basis for the factors is arbitrary. By defining parcels voluntarily the results of path analyses can be easily manipulated. By using parcels the models look much better because of the higher beta-path which are achieved when factors are correlated instead of variables including a lot of measurement error.

Graph 1: Model for the path-analyses as presented in [Table 2](#)  
(including correlations and  $\beta$ -path between the predictors)





In the model we assume that the choice of the school form (Gymnasium versus other types of schools) is determined by the educational level of the parental home. There is a lot of empirical evidence for this assumption, recently shown by the [PISA-study \(Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001\)](#). In our study the correlation within the German population is  $r = .37$ . For those not familiar with the German school system we are adding the information that in Germany students in 14 of the 16 Federal States are appointed to schools with differing levels of qualification after the 4th grade. The highest level is represented by the Gymnasium which after a final exam (the Abitur at the end of the 13th grade) qualifies for studies at universities. The other three regular types of school, such as Realschule, Gesamtschule and Hauptschule end in most Federal States after the 10th grade. There is also a clear differentiation between these three types of school (the qualifying level of the Realschule higher than the one of the Hauptschule) but these types of school are organized differently in the Federal States. We therefore put them together in one category confronting them with the Gymnasium which in all Federal States is defined more similar.

The educational level of the parental home influences political knowledge, not only by the choice of the school type but directly: It can be assumed that students from better educated families know more about civic issues than students from less educated ones. In our study the correlation between the two variables is  $r = .34$ .

The assumption that the educational level of the parents influences democratic competencies is less strong, although since the 1950th the idea more often has been confirmed that higher educated parents provide a more liberal and non authoritarian style of education ([Bronfenbrenner 1958](#)). In our study the correlation between democratic competencies and the educational level of the parental home is  $r = .10$ .

The qualifying level of the school has direct influence on political knowledge. It has been often shown that students from the Gymnasium know more than students from other types of school. Because achievement is the central category in assigning students to these different types of school this connection is self-evident. In our study the correlation is  $r = .48$ .

Again the assumption that higher qualified schools generate more democratic competencies is much weaker although it can be argued that schools which have more motivated students and better learning opportunities may have a better social and learning climate and a richer school life. We allow such a path because we find a positive correlation ( $r = .16$ ) between the two variables and the fit of the model is slightly better when we have this path in the model.

Gender differences play a minor role in political knowledge. Investigations in the past often have demonstrated that boys are better informed politically than girls ([Torney 1975](#)) but recent research shows that nowadays there are only minor differences, girls in more countries being slightly better informed than boys ([Torney-Purta 2001](#)). In the German part

of the IEA-study boys are a little bit better (not significant) informed than girls ( $r=.04$ ).

Gender differences in democratic competencies are much bigger. The research on authoritarianism shows significant gender differences (boys are more authoritarian) (*Kirscht and Dillehay 1967*) and research on social competencies demonstrates that girls are more socially engaged (*Gilligan 1982; Torney-Purta 2001*). In our study girls have much higher democratic competencies than boys ( $r=-.31$ ).

We allowed path for gender differences on political knowledge and democratic competencies.

We are assuming that political knowledge and democratic competencies have positive influence on each other. Although there is no reason to believe that people who are politically better informed are better democrats it is reasonable to think that knowledge might have a positive influence on democratic orientations. The other way around people who have a democratic orientation might be more open for political topics. Because there is no one way relation between the two variables we allowed a correlation in the model. In our study the two variables correlate  $r=.29$ .

Table 2 gives an overview on 14 path-analyses: 5 on general political participation, 2 on participation within school, 4 on political attitudes (attitudes towards the role of women in society, the role of foreigners, national identity and towards right-wing extremism), one on trust in central government related institutions, one on political interest and one on political apathy. The names of the scales most times indicate directly what the scales are measuring. For some scales one major item is mentioned in parenthesis.

All path-analyses prove to be successful models within the structural equation analyses. The fit indices are all better than required. In the table we provide the Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) which can reach 1.0 and should be over .90 to indicate a good model .

**Table 2: Overview on the results of the path-analyses**

( $\beta$ -path)

	Educa-tional level of the parental home	Gender (1=girls2=boys)	Type of school (1=other schools 2=Gym-nasium)	Political know-ledge	Demo-cratic compe-tencies	Model Fit NNFI
Confidence in central government related institutions	-.02	<b>.10</b>	.01	.01	<b>.17</b>	.96
Political apathy	-.03	-.06	-.06	<b>-.21</b>	<b>-.16</b>	.98
Political interest	<b>.13</b>	<b>.16</b>	.03	<b>.17</b>	.08	.96
Readiness for fulfilling demo-cratic duties (such as voting)	<b>.10</b>	.08	.03	<b>.33</b>	<b>.12</b>	.97
Active conventional participation (such as becoming member of a political party)	.08	.05	.01	-.07	.07	.95
Social political engagement (such as	.01	<b>-.17</b>	-.05	<b>-.14</b>	<b>.24</b>	95

helping other people)						
Peaceful political protest	.06	-.07	-.02	.05	<b>.13</b>	95
Illegal political protest (such as blocking traffic)	.07	.03	-.01	<b>-.13</b>	<b>-.19</b>	.98
Expectations for students to accomplish something in school	0	-.02	-.04	.07	<b>.23</b>	.98
Readiness to engage in conflict solution in school	.07	-.07	-.07	-.02	<b>.28</b>	.95
National identification	-.04	<b>.13</b>	-.09	<b>-.16</b>	-.01	97
Right-wing extremism	-.01	-.03	-.07	<b>-.18</b>	<b>-.31</b>	.9
Rights of foreigners living in the country	-.05	-.04	-.01	.09	<b>.26</b>	.98
Women's rights	0	<b>-.31</b>	.03	<b>.19</b>	<b>.20</b>	.98

$\beta$ -path equal or larger than .10 are printed **bold**

The path-analyses show that the five predictors make highly different contributions to central aims of civic education. Overall, democratic competencies are most important in supporting desirable aims of civic education, followed by political knowledge and gender. The educational level of the parental home and the type of school play only a minor role.

On the level of a correlational analysis especially the type of school plays a more important role. In the path-model the effects of type of school are reduced because of shared variance with political knowledge (see [Graph 1](#)). Students at the Gymnasium know much more politically. Therefore the effect of type of school is overruled by the effect of political knowledge.

The level of the parental home has a direct effect on central traditional issues of civic education. Students from families with a higher educational level are more politically interested ( $\beta = .13$ ), more ready to fulfill democratic duties such as voting ( $\beta = .10$ ) and somewhat more ready to take part in conventional participation such as becoming member of a political party.

Much bigger are the effects of gender differences. Boys are more politically interested ( $\beta = .16$ ), more confident in government related institutions ( $\beta = .10$ ) and more nationally identified ( $\beta = .13$ ). Girls are more engaged in women's rights ( $\beta = -.31$ ) and show a higher social political engagement ( $\beta = -.17$ ).

A comparison of the effects of political knowledge and democratic competencies demonstrates that political knowledge is more important in explaining political interest ( $\beta = .17$  vs.  $\beta = .08$ ), the readiness for fulfilling democratic duties, such as voting ( $\beta = .33$  vs.  $\beta = .12$ ), and a lower identification with one's own nation ( $\beta = -.16$  vs.  $\beta = -.01$ ). Democratic

competencies are more important in explaining social political engagement ( $\beta = .24$  vs.  $\beta = -.14$ ), the readiness to engage in conflict solution in school ( $\beta = .28$  vs.  $\beta = -.02$ ), expectations for students to accomplish something in school ( $\beta = .23$  vs.  $\beta = .07$ ), peaceful political protest ( $\beta = .13$  vs.  $\beta = .05$ ), the confidence in central government related institutions ( $\beta = .17$  vs.  $\beta = .01$ ), right wing extremism ( $\beta = -.31$  vs.  $\beta = -.18$ ) and the rights of immigrants (Ausländer) living in Germany ( $\beta = .26$  vs.  $\beta = .09$ ).

Both democratic competencies and political knowledge explain an engagement for women's rights, a rejection of illegal forms of political protest and political apathy.

The most striking difference between political knowledge and democratic competencies is to be found concerning an explanation of social political engagement. Those who are democratic competent, are more socially engaged in society than those who show less democratic competences, and their social commitment and participation in schools is much higher too.

## Conclusions

What are the consequences of these results?

The results show above all that civic education led by a model of a critical, autonomous citizen cannot simply rely on conveying political knowledge. Political knowledge in contrast to democratic competence hardly contributes anything to the aims of socially committed participation - in school as well as in society. Political knowledge neither contributes to supporting equal rights and an unprejudiced contact with immigrants. Democratic competencies on the other hand are of great importance in understanding these forms of political behavior or political attitudes.

These results might not be surprising to people who are engaged in civic education. But the results are highly important considering the fact that the understanding of what schools should transfer has shifted in the last decades dramatically to instruction, knowledge and achievement. Although there can be no doubt that improving the transfer of knowledge and understanding of civic issues is necessary, the strengthening of an educational approach is more important. Young people have to learn to behave and engage in a democratic way. This can not be left to an education in the parental home but has to be a genuine task of the education in school.

If the frameworks of the German federal states are taken seriously, the willingness to cooperate and to compromise will have to be encouraged in order to be successful in civic education. This can be done by strengthening more participation and group work at school and the development of forms of cooperative conflict solving. Generally speaking an open minded school culture should be established which offers chances for the realization of cooperative learning and decision making. The experts of our survey on the aims of civic education in phase I of the project were very clear on this - more cooperation and more political participation in school - (*Oesterreich 1999*) and the results of phase II are absolutely in line with these suggestions.

The problem with the German school system is due to its organization that it limits an extension of social political learning. In the German half-a-day-school-system, there is not much time left for participation. Instruction focuses primarily on achievement. In addition, the German specialty of a tripartite school system which separates students with different cognitive abilities and different social backgrounds very early in life (after the 4th grade) is also an obstacle for civic education. In school systems where students stay together without selection until the end of mandatory school the chance for social learning processes which are the basis for democratic competencies and democratic engagement is much better.

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